WISCONSIN DIVISION OF PUBLIC HEALTH
Department of Health and Family Services

Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

Disease Fact Sheet Series

What is respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)?

RSV is a major cause of respiratory illness among individuals in all age groups. Among infants and young children, it is the most common cause of bronchitis, croup, ear infections and pneumonia. Since RSV is not a reportable disease in Wisconsin, the specific incidence is unknown.

What are the symptoms of RSV?

Infected newborn babies, in their first few weeks of life, may have minimal respiratory symptoms. Symptoms in young children include lethargy, irritability, and poor feeding. Older children and adults develop upper respiratory tract illness and occasional bronchitis. Chronic lung conditions and asthma may be aggravated by RSV infection. Infants, children, the elderly, and individuals with heart or respiratory problems or a weakened immune system are at increased risk of pneumonia and other complications from RSV infection.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms appear 2-8 days after being infected with the virus, usually within 4-6 days.

What is the treatment for RSV?

There is no specific treatment for RSV. Physicians may prescribe anti-viral drugs and preventive medications to infants who have or are at high risk for severe RSV infection, including babies born premature.

How is RSV spread?

The virus may be spread by direct contact of the eye, nose or mouth with discharges from the nose or mouth of an infected person. Indirectly, the virus can be spread on person's hands after they touch inanimate objects contaminated with droplets from the nose or mouth of an infected person. RSV can persist on environmental surfaces for many hours.

For how long is an infected person able to spread RSV?

Individuals with RSV infection shed the virus in the respiratory droplets for the duration of the illness (usually 3-8 days). In rare instances, infants may shed the virus for as long as 3-4 weeks.

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How can RSV infection be prevented?

Strict adherence to good hand washing methods with plenty of soap and water and the sanitary disposal of oral and nasal discharges of infected persons are effective in preventing the spread of the disease. Environmental surfaces contaminated with RSV should be cleaned with soap and water and disinfected. Children with severe respiratory illness or fever should not attend day care until the symptoms have resolved.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No. Reinfection with RSV is common but the illness is generally milder.

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